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Transcript of President's News Conference on His Proposal for Nicaragua

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's news conference yesterday in Washington, as recorded by The New York Times:

OPENING STATEMENT

Good afternoon. And for those of the Christian and Jewish faith, this is the eve of a most holy season. And it's a season for peace and a season for all people of good will to strive together for peace.

I want to announce today a proposal for peace in Central America that can enable liberty and democracy to prevail in this troubled region, and that can protect the security of our own borders, economy and people.

On March 1, in San José, Costa Rica, the leaders of the Nicaraguan democratic resistance met with a broad coalition of other exiled Nicaraguan democrats. They agreed upon and signed an historic proposal to restore peace and democracy in their country. The members of the democratic resistance offered a cease-fire in return for an agreement by the Nicaraguan regime to begin a dialogue mediated by the Bishops Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, with the goal of restoring democracy through honest elections.

To date, the Nicaraguan regime has refused this offer.

The Central American countries, including Nicaragua, have agreed that internal reconciliation is indispensible to regional peace. But we know that, unlike President Duarte of El Salvador, who seeks a dialogue with his opponents, the Communists in Nicaragua have turned, at least up till now, a cold shoulder to appeals for national reconciliation from the Pope and the Nicaraguan bishops. And we know that without incentives none of this will change.

For these reasons, great numbers of Nicaraguans are demanding change and taking up arms to fight for the stolen promise of freedom and democracy. Over 15,000 farmers, small merchants, whites, blacks and Miskito Indians have united to struggle for a true democracy. We supported democracy in Nicaragua before and we support Nicaragua today, democracy today. We supported national reconciliation before and we support it today.

We believe that democracy deserves as much support in Nicaragua as it has received in El Salvador. We're proud of the help that we've given to El Salvador. You may recall that in 1982 we were told that the Communist guerrillas were mounting a final offensive; the Government had no chance, and our approach would lead to greater American involvement. Well, our critics were wrong. Democracy and freedom are winning in El Salvador. President Duarte is pulling his country together and enjoys wide support from the people.

Stress on Limited Help

And all of this with America's help kept strictly limited. The formula that worked in El Salvador — support for democracy, self-defense, economic development and dialogue — will work for the entire region. And we couldn't have accomplished this without bipartisan support in Congress, backed up by the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America headed by Henry Kissinger.

And that's why, after months of consulting with Congressional leaders and listening carefully to their concerns, I am making the following proposal: I'm calling upon both sides to lay down their arms and accept the offer of church-mediated talks on internationally supervised elections, and an end to the repression now in place against the church, the press and individual rights. To the members of the democratic resistance, I ask them to extend their offer of a cease-fire until June 1. To the Congress, I ask for immediate release of the $14 million already appropriated.

While the cease-fire offer is on the table, I pledge these funds will not be used for arms or munitions. These funds will be used for food, clothing and medicine and other support for survival. The democratic opposition cannot be a partner in negotiations without these basic necessities.

Conditions Are Set

If the Sandinistas accept this peace offer, I will keep my funding restrictions in effect. But peace negotiations must not become a cover for deception and delay. If there is no agreement after 60 days of negotiations, I will lift these restrictions unless both sides ask me not to. I want to emphasize that consistent with the 21 goals of the Cantadoran process, the United States continues to seek (1) Nicaragua's implementation of its commitment to democracy made to the Organization of American States; (2), an end to Nicaragua's aggression against its neighbors; (3) a removal of the thousands of Soviet bloc, Cuban, P.L.O., Libyan and other military and security personnel and (4) a return of the Nicaraguan military to a level of parity with their neighbors.

Now later today I will be meeting with Arturo Cruz, Adolfo Calero and Alfonso Rivero to discuss my proposal. Democracy is the road to peace. But if we abandon the brave members of the democratic resistance, we will also remove all constraints on the Communists. Democracy can succeed in Central America, but Congress must release the funds that can create incentives for dialogue and peace.

If we provide too little help, our choice will be a Communist Central America with Communist subversion spreading southward and northward. We face the risk that 100 million people from Panama to our open southern border could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes and threaten the United States with violence, economic chaos and a human tidal wave of refugees.

Central America is not condemned to that dark future of endless violence. If the United States meets its obligations to help those now striving for democracy, they can create a bright future in which peace for all Americans will be secure.

So in the spirit of Easter, let us make this so. I look forward to working with the Congress on this important matter in the coming weeks.

The New York Times/Paul Hosefros

President Reagan talking with President Belisario Betancur of Colombia after their meeting yesterday at the White House.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Nicaragua Incentive

Q. What's the incentive for the Nicaragua Government, Mr. President?

A. Well, to end the bloodshed that is going on, to end the great economic crisis that is growing ever more worse in their country because of what they've done.

Q. Mr. President, Tip O'Neill says that this is a dirty trick, that you're trying to hoodwink the American public into thinking that it is humanitarian aid but it really is a secret plan to proceed militarily.

A. Well, I don't think he's heard this particular plan yet. There have been consultations. But if he's calling this a dirty trick, he's got a funny definition of dirty tricks.

Q. What makes you think that this will make Congress more likely to accept your aid?

A. Well, because Congress in all of their efforts to hinder our continued aid to the contras and to democracy down there, have emphasized the need for peaceful and political solution, and a solution of the kind we've talked here that would result from discussion between the parties.

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned $14 million you think is essential. But if Congress should turn you down, would you look for some other avenue to help the contras, some other way to continue your desire to see a restructuring of the Nicaraguan Government?

A. Well, we're not going to quit and walk away from them no matter what happens

Q. Do you contemplate any military action against Nicaragua? You seem to be offering either/or, and the threat of the $14 million, is that really enough to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government?

A. I think it isn't a case of overthrowing, it's a case of returning to the goals of the revolution that both the contras and the Sandinistas fought for. And as far as our making war or anything, that has never been our intention and we've made that — we've repeated that over and over again.

Other Use for Money

Q. Mr. President, if there is a cease-fire and there are talks, will it help produce anything? What does money, the $14 million, go for then? Back to purchase weapons for the contras?

A. I set it for 60 days. If no agreement can be reached, and unless both sides ask us to continue the same process, then I would think that we could use that $14 million to help the contras in any way.

Q. Mr. President [unintelligible].

A. What say? I'm having a little trouble because I ran out of a battery.

Q. The President of Brazil is——

A. Oh, the President of Brazil. Oh. Oh, I'm sorry. I certainly don't want to — yes, I do, I think that this was a great forward step for Brazil, and all we can do is hope and pray for his well-being.

Colombia and Drugs

Q. Mr. President, in what way will consist the help you're going to give to the Colombian Government to continue the fight against narcotics traffic?

A. Oh, we're in great agreement and we're greatly admiring of what has been accomplished there and what the President has done. And in our talks today, we made agreement — in fact, there will be a statement released on the subject of narcotics alone, that we discussed today.

Q. Do you agree with him about narco traffic? Are you going to take some new action with the Contadora group?

A. We agree with him, and he agrees with us — we both are together on the fact that not only must we continue the program that he has started with regard to intercepting and preventing the shipment of drugs, but also here, where the largest market is, that we continue our efforts to take the customers away from the drugs — which must complement the efforts to take the drugs away from the customers.

Foreign Advisers

Q. Mr. President, your peace offer, is it conditioned on withdrawal of Soviet, Cuban, P.L.O. advisers from Nicaragua? Or only talks on the end of repression?

A. No, we think that this is part of the agreement that must be reached. We said these are the points that were made also by the contras; that they must stop being a threat to their neighbors, get the foreign forces out and return to the democratic goals which they themselves told the Organization of American States was what they were fighting the revolution for.

Q. Mr. President, are the contras aware of this proposal of yours? Have you gone over this with them, or with their leaders?

A. We are just in the process of notifying people of this. You're among the first to hear.

Q. Mr. President, the Sandinistas have already turned down the San José offer from the contras. What makes you think that they will accept this?

A. Because I think there are other things involved here. I don't think that they want to be alone completely in the Americas, with all of their neighbors on the other side. And we believe that we'll have the support of the Contadoras on this. And we think, as I say, they are having great problems as these hostilities go on. Now, you.

More Weapon Funds

Q. Mr. President, even though you will stipulate that the $14 million will not go for weapons and ammunition but will go for humanitarian aid, will not that money then free the contras to use the money that they have been using for food to buy weapons? And then isn't the bottom line still the same?

A. I don't know just.— I have a feeling that they are not well fixed enough to provide any of these things for themselves. And this, again, is one of the things that we have offered, that this will be used for that purpose for as long as they're negotiating to try and have a peaceful settlement.

Q. They are somehow managing to survive; I mean, they're getting food and that sort of thing. So if you give them money for food, can they not then use the money they're now using for food and buy weapons?

A. Well, let me say I think they are close to desperate straits, but I'm going to leave here now because I'm going to be seeing you later in the day.

The Budget

Q. Have you got a budget agreement?

A. Wait a minute. What?

Q. Have you got a budget agreement? Budget?

Q. One more question. Would you agree to bring home all of our troops from all of the countries in South America — in Central America?

A. The only troops that we have down there now are troops that on various maneuvers and training exercises.

Military Exercises

Q. That's right, that's right, but they are in danger, especially some of them that have just gone down there to Honduras, who with their flak jackets and ammunition, they know they're in danger.

A. No, they're ——.

Q. Men and women down there, sir, who are in danger. Will you promise to bring them all home?

A. If you look back through history, you'll find out that we traditionally have used among our neighbors, for jungle training, exercises of this kind. And they're not, as some loud voices up on the Hill have said, they're not down there as a threat to anyone. They're down there as we're training new enlistees in our Army to have a well-trained military that can fight any place that might be required. And this has been done in Honduras repeatedly before. And that's all it is. So we don't have any occupying forces down there. We've got 55 advisers, I think the number still remains, in El Salvador.

Q. When they left the other day to go down there — another contingent of them, especially from Texas — they said on the way they knew there was recent events that made it much more dangerous and their lives were at stake, and they took their ammunition and their other preparations.

A. That sounds like the kind of scuttlebutt you hear when enlisted men start talking among themselves.

Q. These were officers.

A. Well, officers do it.

Q. Have you got a budget agreement? What about the budget?

A. Later on today someone will be talking to you about that.

Q. You've given on defense, haven't you, sir?

A. What?

Q. You've given a little bit on defense?

A. You'll hear all that later this afternoon, but right now — will you get up there and put them back in line?

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THE WASHINGTON POST

A REAGAN INTERVIEW

Nicaragua Policy

Mr. President, you've often given your views of Nicaragua and called it "a war machine" and said it poses a threat to its neighbors and ultimately to our security, but the Sandinistas appear to be firmly in control and there are few signs that they're changing. What, looking back on your policy on the last four years, has it actually accomplished as far as Nicaragua is concerned?

Well, yes, I think there are more people who are opposing the regime right now in Nicaragua than actually fought in the revolution against Somoza [the dictator overthrown in 1979]. And it seems to be growing. The unhappiness of the people—you only have to look at the flood of refugees that are escaping from Nicaragua to realize that the people of that country are not happy with that totalitarian regime.

With what final result?

Well, I know the Contadora [group of Venezuela, Panama, Mexico and Colombia] is still trying to find an answer of that kind. The contras themselves have offered to lay down weapons and go into negotiations in an effort to have what they had fought the revolution for, and that is a democracy. And so, I think as long as the people of Nicaragua are still striving for the goals of the revolution that they themselves fought, I think that we're obligated to try and lend them a hand.

In this country, even though your popularity remains very high, on the issue of Nicaragua polls show that there are many Americans opposed to your policy there and the Congress shows very little inclination to give you the $14 million you've asked. Do you have any new proposals or ideas that would change this view in Congress?

Well, nothing that I can talk about here. But let me just say, I know this about what the polls show and I know what happens up on the Hill. But we've been subjected, in this country, to a very sophisticated lobbying campaign by a totalitarian government—the Sandinistas. There has been a disinformation program that is virtually worldwide, and we know that the Soviets and the Cubans have such a disinformation network that is beyond anything that we can match.

And, of course, I don't think the people have heard actually the thing that we're trying to explain of what is going on. People go down, some people, to Nicaragua and claim they come back now with views that are favorable to that totalitarian government. But why don't they go to some of the neighboring countries and talk to the thousands and thousands of refugees and ask them why they fled Nicaragua?

Is there anything that you can do, as president, that your administration can do to help the contras and their supporters if Congress does not vote this money?

I don't know. That's something I'd have to face if they do this. We're not alone in helping them. As a matter of fact, in spite of the polls there is more and more private support for the contras.

Meeting Gorbachev

On another subject, sir, have you heard back from the Soviets on your proposal for a meeting with Mr. Gorbachev?

Lou, let me just say—and this I know will be kind of frustrating—I've had a response to my letter but I never talk about the content of communications between myself and other heads of state.

Well, without putting it then in the context of the letter, we've heard that the Soviets have given some indication that they would like to meet with you but they have not given a time and place. Could you—

Well, again, as I say, that would be commenting, and that would be opening a door to all kinds of speculation. I wrote, and he answered, and we're in negotiations, and we'll just leave it at that.

Well, do you expect that you will meet with him sometime? Without reference to the letters, do you foresee a summit meeting or a high-level meeting between you and him?

Well, I'm going to continue. I made it evident, or made it plain, that I would have liked such a thing with his predecessors. But I'm going to continue— hopeful that we can have such a meeting.

U.S. Officer's Killing

Has the killing of Maj. Nicholson [a U.S. Army liaison officer shot by a Soviet guard in East Germany March 24] had any impact on these negotiations?

No. There seems to be a little misunderstanding on the part of some columnists about my answer the other day to that, that it made me even more anxious for a summit meeting. Some have made it seem as if I was being an appeaser or something. Not at all. This was a murder, a cold-blooded murder. And it reflects on the difference between two societies—one that has no regard for human life and one like our own that thinks it's the most important thing. And, yes, I want a meeting even more so, to sit down and look someone in the eye and talk to him about what we can do to make sure nothing of this kind happens again.

PHOTOS BY JOHN MCDONNELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

President Reagan with reporters David Hoffman and Lou Cannon during 32-minute interview yesterday in the Oval Office of the White House.

Strategic Defense Plan

Mr. President, on a related subject, the Strategic Defense Initiative, you have said that the world would be a safer place if the superpowers moved to strategic defense from mutual assured destruction. But the Soviets don't agree. Does this mean that the present negotiations in Geneva are really on hold until the Soviets come around to your point of view? Or is there some way that we can move now to have these talks deal with the immediate questions of medium-range or long-range missiles?

Well, I don't think there's any hold on the talks over there. They're in three groups. One group is talking about space, things of—and defense weapons. One is talking about strategic weapons, and the third one is talking about the intermediate-range weapons in Europe. And the negotiations are going forward.

The Strategic Defense Initiative is purely research and Mr. Gromyko [the Soviet foreign minister] himself said there's no way to control that, that it's not covered by any treaty, and the plain truth of the matter is they've been doing the same kind of research in the same areas, and started before we did.

Now I do mean that if this research could lead to the kind of a weapon that would make one have to think twice as to whether they could be successful with the use of nuclear weapons, then it would lead to the very thing that both the late [Soviet leader] Mr. Chernenko and Gromyko have said—and that is that they would like to see the elimination of nuclear weapons. So would we. And if a defensive weapon that could be successful against them helps bring that about by making them too costly to take the chance of putting those costly things in the air only to be shot down, then we'd be further on the way toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. And we'd all be better off.

Do we need an interim agreement to keep the number of missiles down while we're having these talks?

Oh yes, I've never believed that even though they said this—be cause my own response to Mr. Gromyko, when he indicated that same thing to me, my own response was, 'Look, we can settle it right here. We're ready to go all the way on the elimination of nuclear weapons.' But I didn't get an answer.

But, yes, I would think that the logical thing would be to start with the reduction of the numbers of weapons to get them down to a lower level, and my hope has been that, once we start on that path, that gradually everyone would see that it makes more sense to keep on going until you've eliminated them.

Would it be wise to try to achieve that sort of interim agreement about the time the SALT II [strategic arms] limitations would have expired that have been generally observed by both sides?

Oh, I hadn't really thought about whether that makes any difference or not. It's just that the world is living under a threat and other people are going to try, as we know, to get missiles themselves. And some of them are less responsible than others, and they're not all superpowers, and I just think that it's a threat that humankind should not have to live under.

State-Supported Terror

On another subject, Mr. President, a British newspaper reported yesterday that the United States has warned Iran that military retaliation would take place if any of the Americans who have disappeared in Lebanon were to be put on a show trial or murdered by pro-Iranian factions. Has such a warning been issued to Iran?

Well, here again, I don't think I should discuss anything of this kind. What I have said is that there is increasing evidence that some terrorists in the world are actually emissaries of sovereign governments. And if that's the case and it can be established, then that business of trying to find and track down in all the world a few terrorist individuals for some crime, no, go to the source. And the government is—supports them.

Do you put Iran in that category of a government that—

Well, as I say, I can't comment on the specific question that you asked beyond that. But we've been working as closely as we can with allied countries and friends, to see if together between us we can't do something. And, well, we have done something. I think we've had some measure of success—in the exchange of information to get a handle on this widening terrorist activity. We know it's not just one group. There are a number of groups, representing different interests. Sometimes they apparently collaborate and it's a new form of warfare.

Can you tell us something about the accomplishments in this area that you believe you've achieved?

Well, we're making headway and have been successful in getting cooperation and trading information, intelligence information, getting agreements with other countries with regard to extradition and denying their countries as shelter for terrorists who then cross a border and are reasonably, have been in the past reasonably safe if they leave the country where they've been terrorizing, and just getting much more mutual agreement about the need for all of us to work together.

South African Violence

Mr. President, on the subject of South Africa, there have been 38 fatalities and civil strife there in the past few weeks, and the government seems to be engaging in increasing repression, banning assemblies and meetings. Isn't it time to go beyond the policy of constructive engagement and silent diplomacy in our dealings with South Africa?

We think that we're doing is the best, has the best effect, the most effect of anything that we could do. Just walking away would leave us with no, no ability to influence them. We think some progress has been made. We do know that there is a factionalism there, It isn't just a simple question of two groups, the government versus a group. Over in this group there is a division and there is a sector that wants violence as the answer, and they're even violent to the others, not to the government alone. And we think apartheid is the main problem that must be resolved, and we're going to continue doing all that we can to encourage the government in its course.

Have we done anything to try and discourage that government from this violence? It seems that it's gotten worse rather than better.

Well, except that the violence, nothing can be solved by violence. And that isn't the answer. But remember the violence is not just alone stemming from a government put-down of demonstrators. You have, in the black community there, you've got rival factions and the violence is sometimes between them, fighting each other. And we've seen evidence of that, and we've seen murders. And some of the 40 deaths have been created in and among the people without the government participating.

When you mentioned that in your recent news conference, some people in this country and around the world took that as condoning the government's actions. Did they take that wrong?

No, and it wasn't intended to be. But it is true, I think some people, and I would have to say that some who did maybe have a political bias, but they tried to read into it that I was voicing a bias. And I wasn't. I was trying to point out just what I did here. Maybe I should have taken more time. You know, in a press conference you feel a little pressed for time in your answers and sometimes maybe you don't make them as full as they should be. But I was trying to point out that from this being simply people opposed to apartheid against a government that is supporting apartheid, no, it has gone beyond that. There is an element that wants an overthrow of the government by violence and is not just limiting its fighting to the government. It is fighting its own fellow citizens, and even in the same communities.

Defense Budget Cuts

Mr. President, we could change a little bit to domestic matters. I wanted to ask you a question about the budget. You said in a Saturday radio speech recently that you would not accept cuts in vital conventional or strategic weapons systems. The Senate Armed Services Committee has voted to cut 175,000 from the defense payroll to bring down the deficit. Since you don't want to cut weapons systems, would this cut in personnel be acceptable for you?

Well, that wasn't adopted by the committee, was it? I understand it's—

It's part of an option directed toward zero real growth.

No, that is the type of thing I haven't had a chance to study since I heard that also, and see what the effect and where they're choosing these people to go. But as I've said with regard to defense, when you start to economize, you have to look at it from the standpoint not of the number of dollars that you're hoping to save, but what can you do without? Now I don't know whether we can do without that many people, and where they would come from, and what shortages it would create in our defensive capability.

So again, I say, if we can find additional ways—and we have already reduced the original budget considerably—if we can find additional ways in which there could be some postponements of something or other—not weapons systems, there are a number of fairly civilian-type activities that take place in the military also—if some of those would not in any way reduce our defensive capability and yet would provide some savings to help us as we try to get a handle on this budget, all right, that's one way to look. But I don't see where there could be any compromise on weapons systems that have been chosen because we believe they're necessary to redress the imbalance between ourselves and the Soviet Union.

I've heard some spokesmen, and some who should know better, in and out of government, on some of the shows on television and sometimes in the newsprint voicing their opinions, that somehow we're on a parity—they've even used that term—with the Soviet Union. This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. The Soviet Union virtually outnumbers us in any type of weapon you want to name, has consistently modernized their land-based nuclear missiles where we're just trying to do with the traumatic experience of the 21 [MX missiles for which Congress voted to release funds] these last few days, which is the first modernization of our land-based missiles in almost the lifetime of the men and women who are handling these weapons. They are about three-to-one in nuclear megatonnage over us. They outnum-

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Since Maj. Nicholson's killing by a Soviet guard, "I want a meeting [with Gorbachev] even more so. To . . . make sure nothing of this kind happens again."

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